

Bird Note

The Slender-billed Thornbill, *Acanthiza iredalei*, in the lower north-east of South Australia

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The Slender-billed Thornbill, *Acanthiza iredalei*, occurs in low shrublands of semi-arid southern Australia. The nominate subspecies ranges widely across inland South and Western Australia, where it inhabits chenopod shrublands (Blakers, Davies and Reilly 1984, Matthew 1994). Its distribution in South Australia is mainly west from Port Augusta and Whyalla to the Gawler Ranges, and on the Nullarbor Plain, with more isolated occurrences in the Flinders Ranges and the north-west (Matthew 1994).

In the lower north-east of South Australia *A. iredalei* was first recorded in the Nackara district, about 40 km NE of Peterborough, by F. Parsons and E. Ashby in September 1916 (Darke 1929). A specimen was taken (South Australian Museum B22676 - Matthew 1994). Subsequent surveys in the region did not locate the species (e.g. Pearse 1929, Morgan 1933, Brummitt 1937, Mack 1970), although Mack (1970) noted that it occurred to the west of his study area. Matthew (1994) listed a report of *A. iredalei* by J. Cox near Curnamona in 1984. During a survey of the South Olary Plains region, Forward and Robinson (1996) reported *A. iredalei* in bluebush (Pearl Bluebush, *Maireana sedifolia*) on Redcliffe Station, 35 km NW of Morgan. The field data sheet notes a group of birds seen by J. Reid on 13 October 1992

(H. Owens, Department of the Environment, Water and Natural Resources (DEWNR), pers. comm.).

This note reports on recent records of *A. iredalei* in the lower north-east region.

1. **Oulninna Station.** Several *A. iredalei* were reported by Gary Wright from Oulninna Station on 2 September 2005 (Wright 2005). The observation was on a bluebush and saltbush plain a few km SE of Manna Hill and the identification based on the presence of the off-yellow rump (G. Wright pers. comm.).
2. **Bimbowrie and Boolcoomatta Stations.** K. Bellchambers and I observed several pairs of *A. iredalei* in mixed chenopod shrubland dominated by Pearl Bluebush and Blackbush *M. pyramidata* near the boundary of Bimbowrie and Boolcoomatta Stations, about 35 km N of Olary, on 4 May 2006 (Bellchambers and Baker-Gabb 2006). A pair was also seen in Pearl Bluebush on the Boolcoomatta to Kalabity Road, about 25 km NW of Boolcoomatta Homestead, with D. Baker-Gabb on 6 May. On 13 May 2010, A. Black and I observed a group of six *A. iredalei* in Pearl Bluebush on the eastern boundary of Bimbowrie Station, near the observations made on 4 May 2006.
3. **Manunda Station.** On 19 May 2006 A. Black (pers. comm.) observed two *A. iredalei* with Southern Whiteface, *Aphelocephala leucopsis*, in Blackbush about 4 km N of Manunda Homestead.
4. **NW of Morgan.** While assisting on a DEWNR bird monitoring study on the morning of 12 October 2010, I observed a group of six *A. iredalei*, including one juvenile, in

Pearl Bluebush low shrubland 4 km NW of Morgan. I also saw two small groups of *A. iredalei* in similar habitat on Wonga Station, 25 km WNW of Morgan, on 18 September 2015, and one group in the same area on 5 February 2016.

I am familiar with *A. iredalei* from my field assistance with Matthew (1994). Identification in each case was based on the presence of off-white/off yellow rumps and distinctive twittering call, not dissimilar to that of the Southern Whiteface.

The records indicate that *A. iredalei* is now more widespread in the lower north-east than previously recognised. The importance of Pearl Bluebush in the shrubland habitat of *A. iredalei* is also highlighted, a feature noted by Matthew (1994).

Pearl Bluebush is a very long-lived shrub that has declined in abundance and distribution throughout the pastoral region of South Australia (Crisp 1978). In most areas, limited recruitment occurs due to grazing and once lost is difficult to re-establish (Tiver and Andrew 1997, Sinclair 2005).

It is also possible that *A. iredalei* has increased in the region in recent years due to the recovery of grazed down Pearl Bluebush shrubs following more conservative stocking rates and reduced rabbit numbers.

The establishment of reserved areas within the region such as Bimbowrie and Boolcoomatta Stations should ensure that Pearl Bluebush shrublands are maintained in the longer term. In turn this will benefit the population *A. iredalei* and other birds (e.g. Thick-billed Grasswren, *Amytornis modestus* subspecies *curnamona*, Black 2011; Black, Carpenter and Pedler 2011, Bellchambers and Baker-Gabb 2006) that inhabit chenopod shrublands in the lower north-east region.

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